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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002931

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SUBJECT: THAI DOMESTIC POLITICAL ROUNDUP: ABHISIT GOVT HAS
LEGS; REDS PLAN NEXT RALLY; POLICE CHIEF UPDATE

REF: A. BANGKOK 2905 (FIREWORKS AT RALLY)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2875 (THAKSIN STICKS FOOT IN MOUTH)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2642 (CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS UNCERTAIN)

[1](#)D. BANGKOK 2125 (POLICE CHIEF BATTLE)

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Classified By: PolCounselor George Kent, REASON: 1.4 (B, D).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Following a politically disastrous fortnight for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Puea Thai political party (REF B), current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is riding a wave of newfound popularity and enjoying the fruits of Thaksin's missteps. However, Abhisit recognizes that these political gains are likely ephemeral and is wary of the risks associated with calling for snap elections, according to members of the PM's inner circle. Rather than gambling everything by dissolving the Parliament immediately and hoping for a Democrat party/coalition victory, the PM instead appears poised to settle down in Government House for as long as possible.

[1](#)2. (C) Clouds remain on the horizon, however. The anti-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), aka the "red-shirts," plan to return to the streets of Bangkok for a "showdown" rally, scheduled to begin November 29. Red-shirt core leader Jatuporn Promphan announced November 18 the group planned to assemble more than one-million people, with the goal of overthrowing the government. Thaksin himself suggested in a November 18 tweet to supporters that he did not know how long he could "ask the red shirts to be tolerant." Meanwhile, the Police Chief saga (REF D) has settled into something approaching a stalemate, with PM Abhisit's choice of Police General Prateep Tunprasert in place as the interim Chief, and most parties apparently satisfied with the status quo for now.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: PM Abhisit is arguably as well positioned politically now as he has been at any other point since he first assumed office last December, with Thaksin's missteps having given Abhisit a more unified coalition and some

operating room to demonstrate his ability to run the country effectively. Thanks to the near total collapse of the Constitutional reform effort (REF C), and the resulting absence of any obvious trigger on the horizon for a new round of elections, the Democrat-led coalition for now appears to be well positioned to remain in office for some time to come.

Thaksin simply will not go away quietly, however, with his red-shirts preparing another major demonstration just around the corner, using the rhetoric of "war" last heard in the March-April protests which ended in violence, and publicly committed to bringing down the government "before New Year's Day." End Summary and Comment.

ABHISIT RIDING HIGH, FOR NOW

¶4. (C) In the wake of former PM Thaksin's highly publicized visit to Cambodia and his interview with the (London) Times Online which was interpreted by many as disparaging to the King, PM Abhisit has enjoyed a surge in popularity (from 23 to 68 percent, according to one poll). The bounce was so quick and unexpected that members of the PM's inner circle initially gave brief consideration to the possibility of dissolving Parliament and trying to "catch lightning in a bottle" with snap elections. On November 12, Deputy Secretary-General to the Prime Minister for Political Affairs Isra Sunthornvut told us that Abhisit was so grateful for Thaksin's political gaffes that he had jokingly suggested sending him a thank you card. Isra added that although the PM was thinking about calling for snap elections, the reality was that even if he dissolved Parliament immediately, the elections would not take place until mid to late January, by which point Abhisit believed the political dynamic could have

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changed entirely.

¶5. (C) When we met with Deputy PM Suthep's Assistant (and step-son) Akanat Promphan on November 17, he told us that the PM had decided not to dissolve Parliament in the near future; Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij reinforced this sense on the margins of APEC on November 14 when he told reporters he thought the government could remain in office another year. Akanat told us that PM Abhisit had privately concluded his surge in popularity was likely a temporary phenomenon, and that the Democrat party's own prospects in the next election would be dictated by its own track record and not Thaksin's missteps.

¶6. (C) According to Akanat, Abhisit and the Democrats were already in power and had no compelling incentive to call for snap elections in order to secure a new mandate. The current government already had a mandate, he said, and was determined to use it to develop a governing record it could later run on. Akanat told us that Abhisit was not in any hurry to call for elections, and he too believed the government would last for at least another year. Supachai Jaisamut, Phumjai Thai MP and right-hand man for power broker Newin Chidchob, went even further, telling us November 16 that he saw no reason for the coalition to call elections in 2010; it could stay in office for the rest of its term (2011).

LATEST RED RALLY: HOT RHETORIC, NEW TACTICS?

¶7. (C) On November 17, red-shirt core leader Jatuporn Promphan announced the UDD's next big gambit, a so-called "showdown rally" slated to begin November 29. Jatuporn claimed publicly that the red-shirts expected to attract over one million supporters for a demonstration with the explicit goal of "overthrowing the government" by the New Year. Jatuporn told the media that "they (the government) do not deserve to celebrate the New Year. We will make this war as short as possible." Jatuporn said that in the event the government did not fold by December 3, the red-shirts would disperse in order to observe the King's birthday on December

4 and 5, before re-assembling shortly thereafter.

¶8. (U) Not to be outdone, former Prime Minister Thaksin posted comments to his Twitter page on November 17 in which he bemoaned his inability to return to his homeland and access his money, and complained that he had been stripped of his royal decorations. Given all of the adversity he had faced, as well the fact that his life had been threatened, Thaksin closed by observing that he did not know "how long (he could) ask the red shirts to be tolerant."

¶9. (C) Such red rhetoric from Jatuporn and Thaksin is reminiscent of language used by red-shirts in the run-up to the March-April red protests that ended in violence, but UDD spokesperson Sean Boonpraong was somewhat more circumspect about UDD plans when we asked him about Jatuporn's statement November 18. According to Sean Boonpraong, UDD leaders had not yet locked-in its plans for the big rally but would meet November 20 to finalize planning and discuss the next steps. He said there were a variety of details to be worked out, and he personally did not believe the rally would be sufficient to topple the government.

¶10. (C) Core red shirt leaders Veera Musikapong and Jaran Ditapichai in a series of recent meetings with us have suggested that the UDD may adopt new tactics at the next rally, with the goal of throwing the government off balance and rendering Internal Security Act (ISA) controls useless. Veera and Jaran told us separately that the UDD was giving serious consideration to assembling red shirt supporters in several venues scattered throughout Bangkok. By dispersing supporters strategically, as opposed to assembling in one easily secured venue, the government would be forced to consider invoking the Internal Security Act throughout all of

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Bangkok, rather than just one district. This would represent virgin territory for the government, and the RTG would have to carefully consider whether applying the ISA more broadly might represent a deal breaker for civil liberty groups previously respectful of the RTG's need to resort to the ISA.

Both Veera and Jaran suggested such a move would invite widespread criticism, potentially damage Thailand's reputation overseas, and therefore strengthen the UDD's hand.

POLICE CHIEF UPDATE

¶11. (C) One of the most nettlesome issues for PM Abhisit has settled into an apparent stalemate, ultimately to Abhisit's favor. In the face of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn's continued opposition to Abhisit's (and reportedly the Queen's) choice of Police General Prateep Tunprasert as the nation's top cop, Abhisit has decided to keep Prateep in the interim Police Chief position indefinitely. Akanat told us the decision amounted to "the least worst solution," adding that Prateep would probably remain interim Chief until the end of Abhisit's term in office. Though having Prateep remain as interim Chief represented less than a total victory for PM Abhisit, his refusal to buckle in the face of pressure from the Crown Prince demonstrated the PM's mettle.

¶12. (C) PM Abhisit's creative solution to the Police Chief problem has not satisfied all parties, however, as evidenced by the fact that 10 of the 22 Police Commission members decided to boycott the Commission's November 16 meeting. Despite the absence of nearly half of the Commission, the group nevertheless managed to approve a large reshuffle involving 36 top police generals.

JOHN